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ABSTRACT

Based on research which suggests that individuals transmit good news more than bad news and that people are motivated to project a positive image of themselves, 48 college students participated in a study to test the hypothesis that individuals would be more conscientious in giving information when future social interaction was anticipated. Message valence (good/bad) and anticipation of future interaction (yes/no) were varied in a communication paradigm in which student test takers (confederates) sought information on test performance from other students (subjects). The subjects completed questionnaires and their communication length (in seconds) and eye contacts were measured. Data analyses showed that good news subjects engaged in more eye contact and were more truthful than bad news subjects. Questionnaire data revealed that anticipation subjects, both good and bad, believed they made a more favorable impression on the target person than did no-anticipation subjects. The findings suggest that the no-anticipation groups had little incentive to monitor their own behavior. Although self-monitoring is relatively stable within individuals, anticipation of future social interaction may produce transitory effects on self-monitoring. (MCF)

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TRUTH, EVASION, AND DECEPTION:
A STUDY OF COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Tesser and Rosen suggest that individuals transmit good news more than bad news. It was reasoned that individuals would be more conscientious when future social interaction with a target person was expected than otherwise. Message valence (good/bad) and anticipation of future interaction (yes/no) were varied in a communication paradigm in which a confederate sought information from a subject. Good news subjects were more truthful than bad news subjects. A significant valence by anticipation interaction was obtained. The results were interpreted in terms of self-presentation and self-monitoring.

Truth, Evasion, and Deception: A Study of Communicative Behavior

There exists a considerable amount of evidence supportive of the notion that people readily transmit positive messages but withhold negative messages (cf., Tesser and Rosen [1975] for an excellent review). Reinforcement theorists suggest that we like people who are associated with positive events and we dislike those associated with negative events (Clore, 1976; Lott and Lott, 1974). Associations may be direct or indirect and therefore we may dislike those who are even remotely associated with bad news.

Individuals are concerned about how they are perceived by others. People choose words carefully to avoid appearing callous (Goffman, 1959) and people are motivated to project positive images of themselves (Schlenker, 1980). Hence, individuals attempt to associate with good news and disassociate themselves from bad news. To avoid delivering bad news, communicators may resort to evasion or deception.

Projecting a positive social image involves time and energy and the expenditure of these resources will be minimized in situations in which the perceived benefits of social interaction are small. Therefore, communicators are expected to be brief and perfunctory in encounters in which future social interaction with the target person is unlikely. Conversely, when a communicator anticipates that future social interaction with a target person is likely, the communicator is expected to manage his image with care. Furthermore, evasive and deceptive communications should be minimized because the possibility of future interaction with the target person increases the probability of a communicator being exposed as an untruthful person.

In the present study, subjects were provided with feedback on a confederate's performance on Part 1 of the "Social Sensitivity Test (SST)." The feedback consisted of either good news or bad news and half of the subjects were told that they would meet with the test-taker at the end of the session. Subjects administered Part 2 of the SST and the confederate (test-taker) requested feedback on his/her performance on Part 1. The subject's response was tape recorded and eye gaze and communication length were measured. It was predicted that truthfulness and eye contact with the target person (test-taker) would be greater for good news subjects than bad news subjects. It was also predicted that bad news subjects would remain in the interaction more than good news subjects (cf., Kardes, Kimble, DaPolito, and Biers, 1982). Furthermore, subjects anticipating future interaction were expected to be more truthful, speak longer, and engage in eye contact with the target person more than subjects not expecting future social interaction with the target person.

Method

Procedure

Forty-eight University of Dayton introductory psychology students were randomly assigned to experimental conditions. Subjects were asked to administer Part 2 of the SST to a "subject" who had either done well or poorly on Part 1. Half of the subjects were told that they would meet with the test-taker and the experimenter after the test to discuss feelings about the test (Subjects were led to belive that the experiment was designed to test the effects of a test-giver on a test-taker). After the subject read the directions of the SST to the confederate, the confederate asked: "How did I do on Part 1 of the test?" After the subject responded, the confederate

began answering test items and the experimenter entered the room to lead the subject to a sound-attenuated room where he/she was asked to fill out questionnaires while the "subject" was taking the test. When the questionnaires were completed, the experimenter debriefed and thanked the subject.

Dependent Measures

The blind confederate (half of the subjects interacted with a male and half interacted with a female confederate who was blind to experimental hypotheses and conditions) continually gazed into the eyes of the subject to measure cumulative eye contact (with an unobtrusive, silent stopwatch) during communication. This measure was divided by communication length (in seconds) to determine the percentage of time the subject engaged in eye contact during communication (data analysis was performed on this ratio). A blind assistant measured communication length (this data was stored on a tape recorder). Subject's responses were coded into one of four groups: Type 1, or complete and accurate feedback; Type 2, or partial information; Type 3, evasion; and Type 4, deception.

Results

As predicted, good news subjects engaged in more eye contact and good news subjects were more truthful than bad news subjects and bad news subjects spoke longer. A 2 X 2 (Valence X Anticipation) ANOVA on eye gaze proportion yielded a valence main effect, F (1, 44) = 5.385, $p < .03$, with greater eye gaze for good news (See Table 1).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on communication length yielded a valence main effect, F (1, 44) = 12.022, $p < .001$, and a Valence X Anticipation interaction, F (1, 44) = 4.088, $p < .05$. For bad news subjects, communication length was greater under no anticipation than anticipation conditions, whereas the opposite occurred for good news subjects.

However, bad news subjects communicated longer than good news subjects, as predicted (See Table 1).

A 2 X 2 ANOVA on communication type yielded a significant interaction, F (1, 44) = 4.281, $p < .05$, with anticipation affecting type more in good news conditions than bad news conditions (See Table 1). Furthermore, chi-square analyses indicated that evasive communications (Type 3) occurred more in bad news conditions than good news conditions, $\chi^2 = 6.700$, $p < .01$.

Insert Table 1 about here

Questionnaire data revealed good news-anticipation and bad news-no anticipation subjects believed they made a more favorable impression on the target person, F (1, 44) = 9.025, $p < .004$, than the good news-no anticipation and bad news-anticipation subjects. The good news-anticipation and bad news-no anticipation groups also thought they appeared more considerate, F (1, 44) = 7.144, $p < .02$, likeable, F (1, 44) = 5.637, $p < .03$, sincere, F (1, 44) = 6.903, $p < .02$, and pleasant, F (1, 44) = 6.842, $p < .02$, than the good news-no anticipation and bad news-anticipation groups (See Tables 2 and 3).

Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here

Discussion

The hypothesis that good news subjects would engage in more eye contact and be more truthful than bad news subjects was confirmed. The hypothesis that bad news subjects would speak longer than good news subjects was also confirmed. However, the main effects predicted for anticipation of future social interaction did not occur, but an

unexpected interaction consistent along five social image items was obtained. This interaction indicated that good news subjects anticipating future social interaction with the target person believed that they projected a favorable image to the target person, as predicted, but bad news subjects not anticipating future interaction also believed that they managed their image well. Conversely, good news subjects not anticipating future interaction and bad news subjects anticipating future interaction believed they were unsuccessful at self-enhancement.

The good news-anticipation group was the most truthful and this group perceived themselves as presenting favorable images. The bad news-no anticipation group spoke the longest and therefore they projected a conscientious image of themselves because they expended time and effort. The good news-no anticipation and bad news-anticipation groups were the least truthful; apparently these subjects were relatively unmotivated to present favorable images.

Counterintuitive effects occurred along the no anticipation dimension: why would good news subjects care little about their image when a positive image could be projected with little effort, and why would bad news subjects exert great effort to project a positive image when they do not expect to see the target person again? Perhaps the anticipation groups monitored their behavior to enable themselves to present a consistent image in the future, whereas the no anticipation groups had little incentive to monitor their behavior, and consequently, the no anticipation groups would not be able to accurately describe their self-presentations. Anticipation subjects accurately described the images they projected (good news subjects and bad news subjects presented positive and negative images, respectively), whereas no anticipation subjects may have

been relatively inaccurate (good news subjects may have actually been more positive than they thought, and bad news subjects may have actually been more negative than they thought). Although self-monitoring remains relatively stable within individuals (Snyder, 1974, 1979), salient situational cues, such as anticipation of future social interaction with a target person, may produce transitory effects on self-monitoring.

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Table 1

Eye Contact, Communication Length and Type Means Over Message Valence and Anticipation of Future Interaction

	Valence	
	Positive	Negative
Anticipation	.792[a]	.454
	3.29[b]	4.82
	1.833[c]	2.333
No Anticipation	.598	.508
	2.68	8.48
	2.750	2.250

[a] Higher numbers indicate subjects engaged in more eye contact with the target person.

[b] Higher numbers indicate subjects spoke longer (seconds) to the target person.

[c] Lower numbers indicate subjects were more truthful.

Table 2

Favorable Impression, Consideration, and Likeability Means Over Message Valence and Anticipation of Future Interaction[a]

	Valence	
	Positive	Negative
Anticipation	7.250[b]	5.750
	1.833[c]	2.500
	7.500[d]	5.583
No Anticipation	6.000	6.917
	3.250	1.500
	5.500	6.083

[a] All items were measured on 12-point scales.

[b] High numbers indicate subjects believed they made a favorable impression on the target person.

[c] Low numbers indicate subjects believed they appeared less inconsiderate to the target person.

[d] High numbers indicate subjects believed they were liked by the target person.

Table 3

Sincerity and Pleasantness Means Over Message Valence and Anticipation of Future Interaction

	Valence	
	Positive	Negative
Anticipation	2.333[a]	3.667
	2.250[b]	3.417
No Anticipation	3.333	2.750
	3.083	2.500

[a] Subjects' indication of the target person's impression of them on a bipolar adjective checklist with 1 indicating sincere and 8 indicating deceptive.

[b] Subjects' indication of the target person's impression of them on a bipolar adjective checklist with 1 indicating pleasant and 8 indicating unpleasant.